



**Graduation Matters Montana – Student Assistance Foundation  
College Readiness Fund  
Focus Group Protocols**

This packet was developed in concert with the Quaglia Institute to equip local Graduation Matters Montana teams with a protocol and set of suggested questions to use for a series of focus groups to help GMM Teams better understand the barriers and opportunities that help students develop a sense of “why” they should consider going to college.

Funding available through OPI as a result of a grant from the Student Assistance Foundation will enable participating GMM Teams to pay for any administrative and logistical expenses as well as incentives for focus group participation.

***GMM Teams who choose to conduct a series of focus groups should expect to do the following:***

- (1) Use this protocol to conduct a series of focus groups with students and at least one focus group of parents and care takers
- (2) Compile the results of the focus groups and convene a meeting to discuss the results with GMM Team members, students and family members, Student Assistance Foundation staff, school staff and trustees, and higher education staff
- (3) Develop next steps based on key insights derived from the focus group results

***The following sections are included in this packet:***

- (1) Basic overview of how to conduct a focus group
- (2) Focus group protocol for STUDENTS
- (3) Suggested focus group questions for STUDENTS
- (4) Focus group protocol for PARENTS AND CARE TAKERS
- (5) Suggested focus group questions for PARENTS AND CARE TAKERS
- (6) Sample protocol for reporting out results of the focus groups

If you have any questions regarding this packet, please contact Deborah Halliday at the Office of Public Instruction at 406-444-3559 or [dhalliday@mt.gov](mailto:dhalliday@mt.gov).

## **(1) Basic overview of how to conduct a focus group**

Focus groups are a way for a GMM Team to get deeper insight into the experiences, challenges, and opportunities that Montana students navigate as they make their way through high school and anticipate their next steps in life. Done well, focus groups can help the Team “take the pulse” of students and families in your community.

### **LOGISTICS FOR HOSTING A FOCUS GROUP**

- **Choose a quiet location** – at the school for student focus groups; either at the school or in the community for the parent/care taker focus group(s) where the conversation will not be interrupted.
- **Choose a time that is convenient for participants** – it may be easiest to have students participate during the school day, and parents/care takers participate in the evening. Plan to have on-site child care for evening activities.
- **Anticipate the focus group will take one hour** – the suggested questions we provide should allow you time to welcome participants, explain the purpose of the meeting, and ask the questions.
- **Aim for 6 – 8 people per focus group.** For student groups, it is recommended that you hold 4 - 6 focus groups over one or two days (depending on your school size), and that you have male-only and female-only groups.
- **Randomly select focus group participants** – in order to ensure a wide-range of voices are heard. For example, if you are interested in talking with 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students: (1) separate the male students into one list, and the female students into another list; (2) randomly draw 6 – 8 names from each list to form two focus groups. You can then contact the students’ parent or care taker to invite them to a separately scheduled focus group.

### **FOCUS GROUP FACILITATOR GUIDELINES**

- **Have two facilitators present** - one to ask questions, the other to observe and take notes.
- **Assure participants of confidentiality** – Let participants know you will share *what* they say, but not *who* says it. Check that they understand this – give examples if needed.
- **Be aware of your reactions** – Use a neutral, yet comfortable voice and inviting tone of voice; be cautious not to lead participants in a direction, act surprised, hurt or disappointed by their responses. Be aware of your own biases. Are you focusing on what you want to hear or what participants are actually saying?
- **Be respectful of all points of view** – Remind people this is not a debate, or an attempt to reach consensus. It is merely a chance for people to express their opinions, experiences and perceptions about the topic.
- **After a question is asked** – Listen not only for content, but for emotions, paradoxes, contradictions and discomfort. This will help you to understand not just the facts, but the meaning behind the facts. The result of a focus group should not just be information, but insight into the information you are gathering.
- **Ensure that each participant contributes throughout the conversation**

## **(2) Focus group protocol for STUDENTS**

It is preferable to conduct student focus groups during school hours, perhaps during lunch time, providing pizza as an incentive to participate.

The focus group should be conducted by two people: one whose primary responsibility is to ask the questions and another whose primary responsibility is to take notes. The note taker should capture the main ideas, record quotes that encapsulate a main idea, and note any probing questions that are asked. In order to set a conversational tone, it is best to use your own words for the following, rather than read them. The questions themselves should be read. Probing questions for understanding or clarification is permissible.

***Welcome and Introductions*** (may vary depending on relationship between participants and facilitators) Welcome to our discussion. Thank you for taking the time to join us to talk about why students at our school choose to go to college or not. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my role in the school/district is \_\_\_\_\_. This is \_\_\_\_\_ whose role is \_\_\_\_\_ is here to help me take notes. Let's take a minute to go around and introduce ourselves. In addition to your name, please share your favorite activity outside of school.

### ***Confidentiality***

Even though we just introduced ourselves to one another, we want to be clear that we intend this to be a confidential conversation. By that we mean that although we intend to share *what* we learn here with others, we will not be sharing *who* said what. We will report in generalities (e.g., "Some students said..." or "Most students said....") I am not going to say "Can you believe [use a student's name] said this about Mr. [use your colleague's name]." Obviously, your confidentiality is in one another's hands as well. We ask that you respect the fact that confidentiality helps us get honest information. Please answer freely to the extent that you feel you can trust that pledge of confidentiality. If for some reason you do not, please feel free not to answer a particular question or to see one of us after the session. Can I get everyone to signal their agreement to this with a thumbs up?

### **Background and Purpose**

There is a lot of research on the reasons students do and do not continue their education after they graduate from high school. And a lot of experts provide interesting theories. But what we are interested in is why *our* students do or do not continue their education. We are curious about

what you think. We are going to use what we learn to do a better job helping students make good decisions about going to college or not. We believe we are doing a good job, but what we also believe we can do better.

When we use the word "college" in our questions, we really mean any kind of schooling after high school—4 year college, 2 years of college, certificate programs, going into the military, special training in a technical field, and so on. In our conversation "college" is just a short-hand for going to school after high school. Does everyone understand that?

Once we start with the questions, we promise not to go any longer than 30 minutes. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers in a focus group. Every one is entitled to their opinion about the things we are going to ask. You may disagree with what another student says or believes. Feel free to share that, but we are not here to debate answers or to convince one another that our opinion is better than someone else's. We simply want to hear the diversity of points of view on this important topic. You may or may not learn something from our time together; we definitely will.

Also, we want everyone to feel they have had an opportunity to share. Please know that if we shift to another student or gently cut you off, that we do not intend to be rude or disrespectful, but simply have a concern to hear from as many students as we can in the short time we have together.

***Is everyone ready to begin?***



### **(3) Suggested focus group questions for STUDENTS**

Question 1: Please tell us a bit about what you know about college. How do you learn about different colleges? What will help you decide whether to attend college or not?

Question 2: Why might a student believe going to college is important for his/her future but not plan to go?

Question 3: Let me ask the flip side to the previous question: Why might a student believe going to college is not important for his/her future but plan on going to college anyway?

Question 4: What are your goals and dreams for your future? Please explain why you believe that going to college is or is not important for your future. What supports are in place either in school or outside of school to support you in reaching your goals and dreams?

*[If there is silence for more than 20-30 seconds prompt with examples: guidance counselors, family members, friends, community services, financial aid supports, etc.]*

Question 5: What is it that adults in school (teachers, counselors, staff) do that you find helpful or supportive of you reaching your goals and dreams? What more could they be doing, or doing differently, that will better help you reach your goals and dreams?

#### **(4) Focus group protocol for PARENTS AND CARE TAKERS**

It is preferable to conduct parent focus group during a time parents are regularly scheduled to visit the school (e.g., during parent conferences, report card night, before a sports event. etc.). The more convenient you can make it for people to be there, the better attendance you will get and the less disgruntled information. Let participants know ahead of time that you will be asking them to spend up to 60 minutes in a focus group with other parents and care takers as part of your school's effort to understand why students in your community choose to go to college or not. Explain that you will have refreshments and on-site child care available.

The focus group should be conducted by two people: one whose primary responsibility is to ask the questions and another whose primary responsibility is to take notes. The note taker should capture the main ideas, record quotes that encapsulate a main idea, and note any probing questions that are asked. In order to set a conversational tone, it is best to use your own words for the following, rather than read them. The questions themselves should be read. Probing questions for understanding or clarification is permissible.

#### **Welcome and Introductions**

Welcome to our discussion. Thank you for taking the time to join us to talk about why students in our community choose to go to college or not. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my role in the school/district is \_\_\_\_\_. My colleague \_\_\_\_\_ whose role is \_\_\_\_\_ is here to help me take notes. Let's take a minute to go around and introduce ourselves. In addition to your name, please share how many students you currently have in our school system or have graduated from our schools and what grade the oldest child is currently in.

#### **Confidentiality**

Even though we just introduced ourselves to one another, we want to be clear that we intend this to be a confidential conversation. By that we mean that although we intend to share *what* we learn here with others, we will not be sharing *who* said what. We will report in generalities (e.g., "Some parents said..." or "Most parents said....") Obviously, your confidentiality is in one another's hands as well. We asked that you respect the fact that confidentiality helps us get honest and frank information. Please answer freely to the extent that you feel you can trust that pledge of confidentiality. If for some reason you do not, please feel free not to answer a particular or to see one of us after the session. Can I get everyone to signal their agreement to this with a thumbs up?

## **Background and Purpose**

There is a lot of research on the reasons students do and do not continue their education after they graduate from high school. And a lot of experts provide interesting theories. But what we are interested in *why our* students do or do not continue their education. We have no preconceived ideas about this and really want to know what your thoughts are. We are going to use what we learn to see if we can do better by our young people and their futures. We believe we are doing a good job, but what we also believe we can do better.

When we use the word "college" in our questions, we really mean any kind of schooling after high school—4 year college, 2 years of college, certificate programs, going into the military, special training in a technical field, and so on. In our conversation "college" is just a short-hand for going to school after high school. Does everyone understand that?

Once we start with the questions, we promise not to go any longer than 30 minutes, because we know how valuable your time is. Please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. Every one is entitled to their opinion about the things we are going to ask. You may disagree with what someone else says or believes. Feel free to share that, but we are not here to debate answers or to convince one another that one opinion is better than others. We simply want to hear the diversity of points of view on this important topic. You may or may not learn something from our time together; we definitely will.

Also, we want everyone to feel they have had an opportunity to share. Please know that if we shift to another person or gently cut you off, that we do not intend to be rude or disrespectful, but simply have a concern to hear from as many people as we can in the short time we have together.

As appreciation for your time, we will give each of you [participant gift card] for your time. We can't thank you enough.

***Is everyone ready to begin?***



### **(5) Suggested focus group questions for PARENTS AND CARE TAKERS**

Question 1: Please tell us a bit about what you know about college. How do you learn about different options for your child(ren) to attend college?

Question 2: How is school preparing your child for the future? How could school better prepare your child for the future?

Question 3: What are your child's goals and dreams for the future? How does the community or school support your child's goals and dreams?

Question 4: Please explain why you believe that going to college is or is not important for your child's future.

Question 5: What obstacles could get in the way of your child going to college? How has your child's school helped your family overcome those obstacles? How could they help more?



## **(6) Sample protocol for reporting out results of the focus groups**

Once you have completed your series of focus groups, it is important to compile what you heard and learned into a report that can be used to share your findings with the GMM Team and others in order to generate productive discussion about what can be done to have a greater impact on supporting students' next steps in life, upon graduation. This sample protocol can help you organize your results and generate good discussion.

### **SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP REPORT**

Prepared by (facilitator name & role at school).

#### ***Section 1 – Overview***

This past month, (## participants) students, parents and care takers in our district took part in informal focus groups to gain deeper insight into the experiences, challenges, and opportunities that our students navigate as they make their way through high school and anticipate their next steps in life. This is part of our local Graduation Matters (your community) work, which is a school-community effort to increase the number of our students who graduate from high school, excited about their next steps in life.

In separate focus groups, we asked students and parents and care takers each 5 questions.

#### ***For students, we asked:***

*Question 1: Please tell us a bit about what you know about college. How do you learn about different colleges? What will help you decide whether to attend college or not?*

*Question 2: Why might a student believe going to college is important for his/her future but not plan to go?*

*Question 3: Let me ask the flip side to the previous question: Why might a student believe going to college is not important for his/her future but plan on going to college anyway?*

*Question 4: What are your goals and dreams for your future? Please explain why you believe that going to college is or is not important for your future. What supports are in place either in school or outside of school to support you in reaching your goals and dreams?*

*Question 5: What is it that adults in school (teachers, counselors, staff) do that you find helpful or supportive of you reaching your goals and dreams? What more could they be doing, or doing differently, that will better help you reach your goals and dreams?*

#### ***For parents and care takers we asked:***

*Question 1: Please tell us a bit about what you know about college. How do you learn about different options for your child(ren) to attend college?*

*Question 2: How is school preparing your child for the future? How could school better prepare your child for the future?*

*Question 3: What are your child's goals and dreams for the future? How does the community or school support your child's goals and dreams?*

*Question 4: Please explain why you believe that going to college is or is not important for your child's future.*

*Question 5: What obstacles could get in the way of your child going to college? How has your child's school helped your family overcome those obstacles? How could they help more?*

## **Section 2 – Key Findings**

As a result of these focus groups, the themes that came out of the focus groups include: (Note: These are suggested themes – you may have others...)

### ***College awareness***

- Theme 1
- Theme 2

### ***General opinions of the importance of going to college***

- Theme 1
- Theme 2

### ***Obstacles or barriers to students going to college***

- Theme 1
- Theme 2

### ***How our school and community is supporting students' future goals & dreams***

- Theme 1
- Theme 2

### ***What more our school and community can do to support students' future goals & dreams***

- Theme 1
- Theme 2

## **Section 3 – Notable Quotes**

- Share any quotes that illustrate your findings – DO NOT identify the speaker

## **Section 4 – Next Steps**

As a result of these findings, we suggest our GMM Team discuss the following:

- (1) What are we currently doing well to support students' future goals & dreams?
- (2) What more could we be doing, or doing differently to confront the obstacles that were identified in our focus groups?
- (3) What role can the community, families, and higher education play in supporting our work?